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Getting There: Commuter rail link for Valley, Tucson?

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Commuter rail link for Valley, Tucson?

Might a train one day replace crowded Interstate 10 as people's preferred connection between Phoenix and Tucson?

Last week, the federal government awarded the Arizona Department of Transportation a grant of \$1 million to help fund a study for a new intercity passenger rail service linking the two cities.

(This announcement came from the office of Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Tucson, on Tuesday - the day after the House scuttled the first Wall Street bailout bill. No point to be made here, but I found the timing to be interesting.)

According to the release from Pastor's office: "The funding will be used by ADOT to conduct the first year of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the "Sun Corridor" linking Phoenix and Tucson.

"The service would generally follow the Union Pacific Railroad line using Federal Railroad Administration-compliant diesel-powered trains. As many as 15 stations are planned over the 140-mile length."

There's quite a bit to digest here, but let's not lose sight of the big picture: Someone thinks passenger rail can connect Arizona's two largest cities. And I think they're right.

As mentioned before, I was The Associated Press' bullet-train writer in Florida - and I thought that could work. It made sense, using rail to get people off the freeways. Had there been an Orlando-to-Miami line when I was living near the House of the Mouse, I would've been on that once a month.

In Arizona, this seems like a no-brainer. The right-of-way is already there (a massive expense in getting any new transportation corridor built) and between the two cities is an obvious ridership base (projections of 1.2 million passengers annually).

The part about 15 stations I did find troublesome, as the key to making a train an attractive alternative is to slice time off the trip. Add that many stops to a 140-mile trip, and you're topping two hours.

Now, a study is just the first of many steps before a rail line becomes a reality. But it's a start, and one worth keeping an eye on.



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